

South Plains Presbyterian Church  
Keswick vicinity  
Albemarle County  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-942

HABS  
VA,  
2 - KESWICK  
1 -

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS  
VA  
2-KESWICK  
1-

SOUTH PLAINS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

HABS No. VA-942

Location: Keswick vicinity  
Albemarle County  
Virginia

Present Owner: Trustees of South Plains Presbyterian Church

Present Status: Maintained and used for Sunday services

Present Condition: Structurally sound; minor repairs needed

Statement of Significance: South Plains Presbyterian Church, founded in 1819, is one of the oldest Presbyterian Churches in Albemarle County and the "mother" church to the First Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville. Originally a simple one room brick structure, the building design was altered in the early 1900's to incorporate Gothic features and the addition of a vestibule

## HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Traditionally, South Plains Presbyterian Church is said to have been built between 1827 and 1828. There is no factual evidence, however, to support this tradition. The land on which the church stands was originally part of East Belmont, the estate of John Rogers, Sr. In 1820, he gave the lower portion of the estate to his son, Thorton Rogers; and the land became known as Kessick. Thorton Rogers later named the nearby town, Keswick, and had the South Plains Presbyterian Church built on his property. The church, however, is not mentioned in any records until 1871 when Margaret Rogers, Thorton's widow, granted the land to the trustees of South Plains

The church was organized in 1819; and the first official pastor, the Reverend Francis Bowman, arrived in 1824. Thorton Rogers was ordained in 1831 or 1832 but never officially served the church as pastor. In 1839, the South Plains congregation became the "mother" church to the independent congregation of the First Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville. The evidence of the South Plains Church's strong presence by 1839, as well as Thorton Roger's enthusiasm in the 1830's, suggests that the church building existed in the 1830's and was probably erected in the late 1820's as tradition holds.

2. Architect: unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners/Chain of title: The following is the chain of title to the property on which South Plains Presbyterian Church was built. The church itself was built by Thorton Rogers. Deed records can be found in the Clerk's Office of the Albemarle County Courthouse, Charlottesville, Virginia. Each deed is referenced by Deed Book (DB) followed by the volume number and page.

1820, March 1. DB22-117

Grantor: John Rogers, Sr., and his wife

Grantee: Thorton Rogers

1831, August 25. DB29-284

Grantor: John Rogers, Sr.

Grantee: Thorton Rogers

1871, June 15. DR66-439

Grantor: Margaret Rogers  
Grantee: J.J. Bowcocke, B.K. Magruder,  
E. Thurman, Samuel U. Burn-  
ley, William A. Rogers, and  
Charles Hancock, trustees

"...to have and hold the said five  
acres more or less forever in trust  
for the use and benefit of the re-  
ligious congregation usually wor-  
shipping on said premises in connec-  
tion with the Presbyterian Church ..."

4. Original Plans and Construction: The present church is very different from the original church. While there is no specific reference to the earlier appearance, changes in the brickwork suggest the previous arrangement. On the south facade there is evidence of a doorway, two windows, and new brickwork in the gable area. Meanwhile, the north facade suggests two windows only, thus indicating that the entrance at one time faced south. Reverend J.L. McLean refers to this change in his 1938 history of the church. He states that several decades earlier, the entrance was changed and the Gothic windows were introduced. The Reverend John Thomason, recently of South Plains, believes that the building was in the Federal style prior to these changes.

5. Alterations and Changes: Beyond the addition of the vestibule and the Gothic windows in the early 1900's, there have been no major changes. A 1916 photograph indicates the chimney within the western slope of the roof, but there is no evidence to indicate when it was moved to the rear of the building. In 1940, new flooring and wainscoting were installed. In 1956, the window sills along the west facade were repaired using concrete instead of wood. These repairs are mentioned in the records of the Session.

#### B. Historical Content:

Presbyterianism was first introduced to Albemarle County through South Plains Presbyterian Church. Early missionaries were sent by the General Assembly Board of Missions. James C. Wilson arrived in the area around 1812, and William Jesse Armstrong came in 1819. These men were impressed with the "most enlightened people" of Albemarle County. (Wilson, p. 81) With the help of Armstrong, the worshippers of Keswick, Charlottesville, and Proffitt organized; and on October 16, 1819, the Hanover Presbytery recognized the South Plains congregation. This congregation was divided into two sectors with South Plains serving parishoners on the east side of the Southwest Mountains, and Bethel Church serving those on the

west side. One pastor served both churches. The Keswick sector of the South Plains congregation was the first to construct a building and thus became one of the first Presbyterian churches in Albemarle County.

The area around Keswick has a strong history of religious awareness. As James Wilson noted in 1812, the people "all call loudly for and expect missionary labours." (Wilson, p. 81) Mrs. Elisha Thurman, who lived on Wolf Point Mountain (now known as Edgehill Mountain), often opened her home for services, as there was no church building other than the courthouse in Charlottesville in the early 1800's. Mrs. Thurman also established the first Sunday School in the county in her home. In 1819, the original ruling elders of South Plains were: John Kelly, John Rogers, and Thorton Rogers. It was not until 1924 that the church secured their own pastor, the Rev. Francis Bowman. Previous to that time, the congregation had relied on visiting ministers. Thorton Rogers was later ordained around 1831. While he did help the church when needed, he never served officially as pastor. He did, however, conduct a classical school nearby. It is the land of Thorton Roger's Kessick estate on which the South Plains Presbyterian Church now stands.

In 1825, William S. White became the pastor. During his service, South Plains began to weaken as emigrants moved to Mississippi and Charlottesville began to grow and amass its own congregation. By May of 1837, South Plains was reduced to a mere appendage as the majority of the pastor's services were shared between the First Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville and Bethel Church in Proffitt. South Plains only held services at this time on Saturdays. It was not long, though, until the church was reestablished for in 1839, the Charlottesville Church became an independent organization. South Plains then resumed the service of its congregation, serving both the Keswick and Proffitt areas. In 1870, Bethel Church became its own organization, thus leaving South Plains free of the original tripartite organization. South Plains continued to thrive and expand. During this time, the new manse was built to replace an earlier one that had burned. In 1889, the church began to conduct a Sunday School in a school house at Boyd's Tavern; and in 1893, they built a chapel there. Remodeling in the early twentieth century resulted in a new entrance with a vestibule and Gothic windows. Today, South Plains Presbyterian Church continues to provide for worshippers in the Keswick area with services on Sunday and a Sunday School.

## ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: Built circa 1828, South Plains Presbyterian Church was originally a simple one room brick building. The original design was modified around the turn of the century to incorporate Gothic features.
2. Condition of the fabric: The exterior brick masonry is basically sound. However, the ivy clinging to the brick is damaging the mortar. The roof and woodwork are in good condition. The interior is well maintained, modernized, and still in use.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The one-and-one-half story building has a rectangular sanctuary measuring 28' - 5" across the front and 40' - 7" along the sides. The vestibule, centered across the front facade, measures 12' - 1" wide and extends 6' - 9" out from the sanctuary. The apex of the roof rises 14' - 1" from the bottom of the cornice, making the building height 29' - 9". From the rear, there is access to an unfinished cellar consisting of no more than a crawl space.
2. Foundations: The sanctuary is constructed of brick while the chimney and vestibule additions are built of concrete block. The brick walls measure one foot thick, and the concrete block is approximately 17" square in the chimney and 9" wide in the vestibule. Along the east facade there is evidence of old ventilation holes where bricks are missing. Generally, these openings are three brick courses in height and located about one brick course off of the ground. More recent grilled openings have been installed for the same purpose.
3. Wall Construction: The exterior of the building is brick with wooden cornices. The sanctuary is predominantly four course English bond with occasional five course bonding. The pointed Gothic windows and doorway have wooden mouldings and brick arch surrounds. The front doorway also has a surround of raised brick headers.
4. Structural systems: The building is supported by load bearing walls and a hammerbeam truss system. The floor system is new, consisting of 2" wooden joists on 1' - 2" centers that run east to west.

The floor system is strengthened by two low concrete support walls with 4' centers. These walls run north to south the entire length of the building.

5. Vestibule: The single bay gabled vestibule was added in the early 1900's, changing the entrance-way from the south to north facade. The exterior is brick while the interior is faced with concrete blocks and has a cement floor. The roofline is gabled to echo the sanctuary roof, and the doorway is capped with an elaboration of the pointed Gothic windows.
6. Chimney: While there is evidence of an earlier chimney included in the roof along its western slope, the present chimney is attached to the rear facade, serving a furnace in the cellar. It is one concrete block square and painted brick red.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorway: The doorway is within the vestibule along the north elevation. Recessed within a wooden moulding, the doorway is surmounted by an arched transom that is also included in the moulding. The window of plate glass has wooden tracery muntins, as do the other windows, and is surrounded by a double segmental arch of headers, the outer row being raised. The paired doors with raised panels measure 2' x 5' each and are secured with an iron box lock system.
  - b. Windows: The east and west elevations both have three pointed Gothic sash windows. The north and south elevations have similar windows raised within the gable. These windows are all double hung with wooden tracery muntins. They are set within a wooden trim and surrounded by a segmental arch of brick stretchers. The sills on the east side are the original wood sills while those on the west have been replaced with concrete sills.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: The roofs of both the sanctuary and the vestibule are steep pitched gables rising from the cornice line at an approximately forty-five degree angle. The sanctuary roof is slate while the vestibule roof is covered with ordinary shingles.
  - b. Cornice: The cornice of the sanctuary is wood and begins with a cavetto that then angles up to a quarter round fillet that meets the roof surface. The vestibule cornice is also of wood,

yet more elaborate. The lower cavetto is topped with a beaded element and cyma reversa curve that leads back to the roof. Both of the cornices are painted white. There is no gutter system.

### C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plan: The sanctuary is rectangular with a centered vestibule on the north allowing entry. Along the south wall, there is a raised platform with a railing for the altar and the choir. The cellar area immediately below is merely a crawl space and of the same dimensions.
2. Flooring: The present flooring was installed in 1940. It is made of random running boards of 2 1/4" width running north to south for the entire length of the building. The raised platform has red carpeting as well as the vestibule with the cement floor underneath.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are plastered and painted white. At the point where the truss system begins, the walls curve back to receive the angle of the ceiling. Wainscoating surrounds the lower portion of the wall. Beginning with a baseboard that rises 6 1/2" and is bounded by a quarter round at the top and bottom, the wainscoating is capped by a chair rail 3' - 1" above the baseboard. The chair rail begins with a quarter round that then drops down into a cavetto that leads to the irregularly spaced raised panels. The wainscoating rises an additional 1' - 3" on the southern end of the sanctuary where the raised platform is located.

The ceiling is an exposed hammerbeam truss system. Both the wooden beams and rafters have chamfered edges. Diagonal beaded boarding runs behind the rafters. The vestibule has exposed rafters with chamfered edges against a white plastered ceiling.

#### 4. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Two paired wooden doors in a dark finish are the entrance to this church. The surrounding white wood trim goes beyond the door to encompass a pointed Gothic transom. The transom window is plate glass with wood tracery muntins that echo the sanctuary windows' design. The transom is surrounded by a double row of arched headers, the outer row being raised. The doors have five raised panels and an iron box latch.

The entrance to the sanctuary is a 4' - 6" wide opening with two paired four panel doors. The doors have a dark finish, are surrounded by a



plain trim, and set into a deep recess with a one foot thick jamb. The door also has an iron box latch with a knob.

- b. Windows: The three windows on the east and west facades and the higher windows on the north and south facades provide adequate natural lighting for the interior. The wood tracery adds style and elegance to the simple building, yet the clear panes of glass maintain simplicity and openness. There is a faint remnant of irregularly colored glass in the window in the south wall, indicating that at one time, the windows might have been more ornate and the light quality, different. Today, the high windows illuminate the truss system, and the transom window gives light to the small enclosed vestibule.
6. Decorative features: The church is filled with typical furnishings that reflect the function of the otherwise very plain space. There are two rows of pews measuring 9' - 11" by 1' - 3" flanking a center aisle. A pulpit and baptismal font adorn the raised platform. Behind the platform a simple wooden triglyph forms the altar with a cross in its center. These furnishings are all of different periods and styles and therefore are not considered significant to the character of the building.
7. Hardware: Both the sanctuary and the vestibule doors are connected with butt hinges of iron. Both also have box locks, the vestibule door opening with a latch, and the sanctuary door using a knob. The locks as well as the stoppers at the top and bottom of the doors are in iron with ornamental scroll work.
8. Mechanical systems: The church has beautiful lighting fixtures. Frosted glass globes with painted gold designs hang from the hammerbeams. Bracketed to the window trim are kerosene lamps. The brackets are brass and very elaborate.

The heating system is new, consisting of a furnace in the cellar and vents along the baseboard of the sanctuary.

#### D. Site

1. General Setting and Orientation: South Plains Presbyterian Church today faces Route 22 with Route 648 bounding the site on the east. To the west is the church manse, and the cemetery lies directly to the south. One approaches the church by a circular gravel drive from Rt. 648. The land slopes down toward the north, so Rt. 22 is not directly visible from the

road. The church building is surrounded by several mature oak, locust, and ash trees

2. Historical landscape design: The church originally faced south as evidenced by the old window and door openings. There is indication that a road lead from Rt. 22 between the church on its western side and the manse, possibly leading to the original entrance.

#### SOURCES OF INFORMATION

##### A. Early views

Photograph of South Plains Presbyterian Church found in "The Home Mission Messenger" of Western Hanover Presbytery, vol. V, #4, Charlottesville, Va., August, 1916. (from records in library, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia)

##### B. Interviews

Miss Georgia Grissinger  
Rev. John Thomason

##### C. Bibliography

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###### 2. Secondary and published sources

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#### PROJECT INFORMATION

This documentation was produced at the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, under the direction of K. Edward Lay, Professor of Architecture, during the Spring Semester, 1984. The material was prepared by Mary Alison Stone, Graduate Student in Architectural History, and Janes Johnson Vernon, Graduate Student in Architecture. It was donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey. The project was not supervised by HABS, nor edited by members of the HABS staff.